

Trumpeter (1994)

ISSN: 0832-6193

DOING NOT DOING: AN ECOSOPHIC WAY

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Trumpeter

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I have, for many years, been trying to explain to myself why ecological and environmental action groups and individuals have had *seemingly* so little success. Yes, of course, I recognize that in very many instances, they have been successful in halting depredation of specific sites and species. Certainly I cannot fault these endeavours.

However, the world still plunges along in a technocratic mindscape (Drengson, 1989) that threatens us all with ecological, social and economic chaos. I often imagine myself taking up some banner in order to raise public consciousness about a local, regional or global issue. But, I know that it is not my "style" to become involved in such dramatic and public Ways. I have always been in awe of those who are in the forefront of environmental actions. My position, perhaps, might best be given by Bosco (1992), who has said, "A mystic is someone who is equally uncomfortable everywhere."

In recent papers (Sawada & Caley, 1990; Caley & Sawada, 1993; Caley, 1993) I have explored some Ways of ecosophic action. Some of these Ways have involved calls to action. In the past few years I have entered into deep personal introspection, often on my own involvement or lack, in ecological and environmental action. Much of this introspection arises from increasing explorations in meditation, Taijiquan, Liuhe and Qigong. As I become more aware of myself as a creative ecosophic philosopher in Drengson's sense (1989), I am coming to understand that there are many Ways to be active.

My teachings are easy to understand and easy to put into practice.
Yet your intellect will never grasp them, and if you try to practice
them, you will fail (Lao Tzu).

In this essay I will discuss my limited understanding of action within the Chinese concept of "wei wu wei", which *may* be translated as actionless action or doing not doing. Wei wu wei is a state in which the person is completely attuned to all of the world around them. But action, in the typical Western sense of doing something, is not always evident. A person in the state of wei wu wei

could be seen to "be doing nothing". This might be exactly the action that is necessary at that time and place. (This reminds me of Sessions & Devall's (1985) ecological injunction, "DO NOTHING!").

Therefore the master acts without doing anything and teaches without saying anything. Things arise and she lets them come; things disappear and she lets them go (Lao Tzu).

Wei wu wei arises out of intense activity in meditation, martial arts, yoga or some similar discipline. However, it is only entered into through passivity, in the sense of "letting go." Deng (1990), discusses this idea of letting go as *jue xue*, "to give up learning". By this is meant that "learning should not become the tool of selfish egotism. When they say to give up learning, they mean that we should transcend technical details and enter into a creative state in which our actions are deeply intuitive and correct." This is most commonly perceived when a musician simply plays her instrument without recourse to scores and practice and out of sheer joy. She has transcended technique.

Wei wu wei is that state of *stillness* that all martial artists hope to achieve and that all meditators eventually discover. However, it requires many years of practice, Liuhe, Yoga, Zen, Meditation, etc. for the player to come to wei wu wei in both mind and body. [It is really mindbody - no Cartesian dialectic!] I am only beginning to know wei wu wei in my ninth year of playing Taijiquan.

Knowing others is intelligence, knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power (Lao Tzu).

Wei wu wei is a profound sense of stillness that reshapes and repairs all Ways of *doing and not doing*. Often it is the not doing in which one becomes far more active than in doing. Of course, in a subtle sense, all of this is non-sense. The problem here is that the experience is not describable in any language. This has always been the problem of prophets and sages. Wei wu wei can be shared, if you accept the training, but it can never be meaningfully described. (Describe the taste of an apple to someone who has never eaten one.)

Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself? (Lao Tzu)

In this sense, then, I want to explore ecosophic action based on wei wu wei. In its simplest form, it could be thought of as "setting an example" or "being an exemplar". Since not everyone who knows me or who reads my work will be

willing to undergo the training needed to know stillness, it seems that I might be able to provide myself as an example of what stillness might be. Ecosophically, this means actions undertaken/not undertaken for their ecosophic correctness (following the Way), that illuminate for others ways of being that they might otherwise ignore.

The master doesn't talk, he acts. When his work is done, The people say, " Amazing we did it, all by ourselves!" (Lao Tzu)

For example, in March of 1992, I sold my seven year old Toyota. The vehicle was beginning to reach that stage when repairs would cost as much as its market value. I examined my life and that of my family and realized that we could continue to exist without a personal automobile.

The money from the sale was used to purchase new bicycles. My mid-teenage daughter decided against a new bike. At her age they are not "cool". My late-teenage daughter leaped at the thought of a new "high-tech" bike. My wife is still undecided.

I now travel everywhere in Edmonton on my bike, usually, weather not withstanding. If necessary I hire a taxi (e.g. our daughter's high school graduation dinner and dance). In extremely inclement weather, I do use the transit system, which works just fine.

My wife does the grocery shopping at a mega store bimonthly, which she travels to by bus and returns from by cab (\$6.00/trip or \$12.00/month). This is obviously much less than the monthly cost to fuel a car. In fact, my former annual auto insurance rates of about \$700.00 translates into 58 months of taxi fares or about six years of grocery shopping. So we seem to be saving money and certainly our impact on the local and global environment is less than it was.

In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep it simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don't try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present (Lao Tzu).

When I tell people that I do not own a car, they are often very surprised and *impressed*. I explain that we made a decision when faced with the choice of replacing the "old" vehicle with a new one or "doing" without. But I am still amazed that most people tell me that they are impressed with my decision and that they wish that they had the strength to get rid of their cars.

It is interesting that they are always able to justify to themselves both why they should not have a personal vehicle and why they cannot function without one. The usual argument is that their time is much too valuable to waste. I've never

understood the concept of valuable time, but I do know that my best thinking often is done when I'm "wasting time". I suspect that this is really *shibus* time, not wasted time (Sawada & Caley, 1990).

I used to go through lengthy explanations to show how they could do without a car. To my knowledge this has had no effect whatsoever on anyone. However, I suspect that as I go about my life "carless" but "successful", I become an example of what can be done by not doing. Similarly, as I become *wei wu wei*, I also become an example of a critically examined spiritual life.

Act without doing; work without effort. Think of the small as large and the few as many. Confront the difficult while it is easy; accomplish the great task by a series of small acts (Lao Tzu).

Ecosophy then, for me, is becoming/being; not of urging and exhorting others to wake up and/or become involved, but rather a way of being with the world, with all its joys and ills. There are very many ecosophically minded people who will take on the "activist" role (e.g. Drengson, Naess) and who will be very successful. For others, such as me, *wei wu wei* is the Way of doing not doing or perhaps not doing doing. Our lives will be exemplars as our actions are ecosophic.

Those who know don't talk. Those who talk don't know (Lao Tzu).

Note: All indented quotes are taken from Stephen Mitchell's translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. I like this translation because it is in modern English and many of the enigmatic aspects of the original Chinese have been eliminated.

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Citation Format

Caley, Michael T. (1994) DOING NOT DOING: AN ECOSOPHIC WAY *Trumpeter*: 11, 1.
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